



April 2010

THE GOOSE AND THE GANDER

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On November 10, 2008, David Rohde, a *New York Times* reporter, was kidnapped by the Taliban. At the request of the *Times*, the press “embargoed” that information—they did not report on it in any fashion—for 7 months, until Rohde escaped. To justify their request, the *Times* made the case to their colleagues that any publicity would put their reporter’s life in danger. This effort was so aggressive that *Wikipedia*, the online encyclopedia written and maintained by its readers, kept constant vigil over Rohde’s page, and repeatedly deleted attempts to document the fact of his kidnapping, even though, according to the *Times* Public Editor, writing on July 5, 2009, the Taliban had already distributed propaganda tapes while Rohde and his associates were captives.

This was not the first time that the press would withhold information about a kidnapping when the victim was a reporter. When Jill Carroll, a freelance reporter for the *Christian Science Monitor*, was abducted in Iraq, a press embargo held for 3 days until *al Jazeera* broke it (and, of course, once one major outlet reports the story, there is little reason for others to hold back). In Afghanistan, *CBC* reporter Mellissa Fung was held for a month by the Taliban, and that information was not reported during her captivity, either. This desire to keep press kidnappings quiet reflects a sad lesson learned from the case of Daniel Pearl, the *Wall Street Journal* reporter kidnapped and killed in Pakistan in 2002. The *Journal*, and Pearl’s family, pushed hard to get his story “play,” hoping it would humanize him to his captors, unfortunately to no avail.

The decision to defer press reports concerning these kidnappings until the victim is safe is not only the responsible, but the humane thing to do. The American people may have a right to know, but they do not necessarily have a right to know *right now*, and when there is a human life in the balance, a delay is certainly justified.

However, on the morning of July 2, 2009, all the major press outlets reported that the Taliban was claiming to have captured an American Soldier. This abduction was reported so quickly that the U.S. military was unable to confirm the claim one way or the other. Consequently, the media was relying solely on the claims of Taliban “spokesmen.” Indeed, according to *ABC News* on July 19, 2009, a DoD official told them that if it hadn’t been for the *BBC* breaking the story, “the military would have kept the story quiet . . . to minimize the amount of information that might get back to [the

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Soldier's] captors." (Reflecting what is clearly a double standard, in the case of the Rohde kidnapping, the *Times* persuaded several papers to *delete* Rohde's wedding notice so as to prevent personal information from falling into the hands of his kidnappers.) On July 19 and again on Christmas Day, the news networks returned to the story of the kidnapped Soldier, most playing and replaying excerpts of Taliban propaganda videos featuring the Soldier. (Reflecting the capabilities of today's news media technology, both print and broadcast outlets posted clips from the videos on their websites.)

The willingness to release information on one class of hostages – American military personnel – while withholding the same information regarding another class of hostages – fellow members of the press corps – is, if nothing else, a somewhat obvious double standard. Either publicizing a kidnapping puts the victim at risk or it does not, and it is hard to imagine a reason why Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, or Marines should not be granted the same respect in such a situation as is given to a reporter. It is common for members of the press to argue that they are not representatives of any particular country, and that they must observe a level of studied neutrality. The wisdom of such a position aside, these service members are not being taken by another state, but by stateless, brutal, terrorist groups, which use the taking of hostages as a tool of terror and of intimidation, and the desire to temporarily withhold information to protect the life of an individual service member hardly seems to violate objectivity. After all, these same news media organizations regularly tout the fact that when they are convinced by the government that national security interests are legitimately involved, they willingly withhold stories (for example, not reporting that particular Taliban leaders were captured until there is a chance to exploit intelligence gained subsequent to their capture), sometimes, indeed, details of a story are not reported for years – or at all.

When specifically asked if this practice represents a double standard, answers from the press have been less than satisfactory. However, being sensitive to the criticism, the *Times'* executive editor, Bill Keller, told their Public Editor that he thought it would be worth "discussing" a process to build in a pause in the reporting of these kidnappings, allowing the *Times* to reach out to relevant institutions and ask them if they want a news blackout, rather than taking the position that the institutions, like the military or the nongovernmental organization that the victim was working for, can always ask for one if they want one.

This, it seems to me, is the very least that can be done by any news media organization that has already demonstrated that it is willing to agree to withhold information on the kidnapping of reporters. I would also ask these outlets to pledge that they will not air propaganda videos featuring kidnapping victims. They can certainly report on them, to be sure, but they should not actually air the videos, or use clips from them in web-based stories. Reporters and Soldiers will most likely continue to be kidnapped. Propaganda videos will still be made, if only for the Internet. However, these humane self-imposed restrictions will cause the terrorists to lose their easy access to their most important audience, thereby losing one of their primary motivations for conducting these horrific crimes.

In the December 25 video, the captured U.S. Soldier states that American political leaders cannot be trusted, that America no longer has any hope of winning in Afghanistan, and that her enemies have “perfected” the art of warfare. Do we really believe that this young Soldier intended to make these statements on his own? Do we really believe that society benefits by watching these emotional spectacles, which are nothing more than forced performances? Professional and informative news reports can still be filed using still images of the victim extracted from the video. These brutal abductions are committed so that the terrorists gain attention for their own political and ideological agendas. The bottom line is that the news media should not allow itself to become participants in the terrorist exploitation of these helpless victims.

To be clear, are these terrorist videos newsworthy? Absolutely, and they should be reported. However, my objection is to the apparent willingness of the news media to show video clips from a staged and contrived hostage performance, using captive American military personnel to elicit whatever emotional response the terrorist group believes will benefit their cause the most. There is no question that it will be hard enough for such an agreement to hold when the time comes, but there is virtually no chance for such an agreement to succeed if one is not in place beforehand. The press should take the proactive step and make such an agreement now, rather than wringing their hands after the death of another Soldier.

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